Katherine Grisham

Wray

Sophomore Honors English

31 March 2015

The Point of No Return

Three days, three days we’ve been marching across valleys and rocks and mud. Three days. I spread my crumpled mat on the ground beside the fire. Three years I’ve been in the *legendary* Roman Army. Three years I have repeated days like the past three over and over. And for what? Glory? Honor? Justice? Ha! With every great empire there is an army to do its dirty work. Soldiers to take out who oppose them. Corrupt leaders to call the shots. Rome doesn’t have what it stands for. Each kill is just another stain to add to my already dripping crimson soul. Why am I even bothering?

What a stupid question. What an even more stupid response.

With a heavy sigh I slowly settle my tired, heavy limbs down on the mat. From my battered bag I pull out my two chipped dice, the only reminder of the life I left behind. It’s a miracle that I haven’t lost them yet. Maybe the gods aren’t completely useless. I roll them around in my left hand. Caressing each circular impression. Memorizing each cracked corner. Counting each roughly carved ridge that jutted out.

One… two… three…

“Mind if I join you for a game of *Tali*?” asks the dark, elongated shadow of a man, arms held up in a gesture of inquiry.

*Tali*… For a game of chance it’s a wonder I’ve always won at it. It’s been several months now since I’ve played anyone whose presented a challenge. I glance at the dice I’ve been rolling around in my hand, “Not at all. Though I only have two die.”

“We’ll just roll them twice.”

“Then please. Sit.” As the figure drew closer to the flames, his outline becomes more definite -intelligent eyes, thick dark hair, hard-set jaw, lean, muscular physique. Marcus Corvus, commander of the eighth cohort or Caesar’s army. I watch as he sits across from me on the ratty mat I laid across the trampled, turned up dirt earth beneath our feet. After he sat his gaze settled on my face, waiting. “Any stakes placed on this game?” I ask after several seconds of silence.

“Stakes,” he says slowly, eyes staring at the darkening sky, “No stakes… money, no money… What difference does it make? We all are going to end up at the same place at some time or another,” he laughs, “And whether you were rich or poor won’t matter.” The back or my neck tingled briefly. It was as if he had just taken the thoughts straight out of my mind.

Ignoring the strange sensation, I look at my die in the palm of my hand. “ No stakes it is then. A friendly match.” I smile and look up Marcus. “You can have first roll.”

He chuckles, “Come on. What’s life without a little risk? How about the loser of the match tells.”

“Tells what?”

“A secret,” he grins. “I’ve got no money to lose, nor is there anywhere around this gods forsaken camp you can buy me a drink, and I’m sure as Jupiter not betting what clothing I have, so a secret is the only other option.”

Secrets are dirty things. They linger and haunt you continuously like a soul rejected from Hades himself. It’s so tempting to let one, just one out. I level my constantly shifting eyes to his steady grey ones. “Deal.”

“First drop goes to you, Heaven knows you need the *res secundae*.”

“*Gratias*.” My mind turned at his words – Heaven knows I need the good luck. What does he know about luck? He’s probably like every other Roman here, a man with nothing better to do than to than to slit another innocent’s throat, to prove they are part of something that’s going to make a difference.

Marcus tilts his head and looks at me with a slightly concerned expression, “Any day now will work fine.”

“My apologies. I was merely considering whether luck would be on my side, despite your grand gesture to let me roll first.”

“What makes you think otherwise?”

Before I can stop the words from slipping out of my mouth I say, “One could say that luck hasn’t been on my side.” Immediately I regret ever uttering a syllable. I want to suck the words back into my mouth. Turn back time. Anything. When I raise my eyes to his face, I’m surprised to find his expression has changed into one of a smirk.

“Join the club.”

I’m baffled.

My befuddlement must be spattered across my face because Marcus says, “What? You’re like every Roman here. We all have a past to run from. A reason to redeem ourselves.” His stare pierces right through me. Right to my core. “The question is how is it your past isn’t like the rest of ours?”

My heart rate triples. I try to feign innocence. “I don’t understand what you are implying.”

He leans back, hands digging into the dirt, little bits of muck crawling into the crevices of his fingernails, the red-brown mud smearing into his palms. He raises an eyebrow, not buying it.

He knows, he knows, he knows.

He couldn’t possibly know. There is no way he could. It seems as though time itself stopped. An eerie silence settled across the camp. All chatter ceases. All hushed planning within the tents freeze. All actions halt midway. The foggy breathes of the soldiers in the chilled air dangle. The sun hangs, still, suspended in the sky, tittering on the edge of night.

I blink. The spell breaks.

I smile, put on my concealment, and face Marcus. “I suppose that’s for me to know and you not to.”

“Ah,” he says slowly, “So I reckon, it’s a secret.”

*Futuo*! “Yes.” I respond.

“Then that’s the secret I’ll play you for.”

“And if you lose?”

“Why of course I’ll tell you why I’m here.”

“Hm. Well I already agreed, despite not knowing what secret to share.”

He chuckles, “Yes, foolish move on your part.”

“Foolish move on my part,” I repeat. Aloud. In my head. Over and over. *Foolish. Foolish. Foolish.*

“Then at long last, let the games begin!” Marcus bellows with fervor.

Under my breath I mutter, “I think they already did,” then louder, “how many rounds?”

“Best out of three,” says Marcus.

I nod and begin shaking the dice in my hand. Up, down, up down, up, down, and throw. One die spins and falls on one. The second lands on one. Not a great first pair. I grab the dice, and repeat the same process, except this time one die lands on a four and the other on a three, adding up to a grand total of nine.

No good.

Marcus plucked the dice up from the ground, shook them and blew on them for good luck. While he was throwing his dice to the ground, I turned my head to the sky, watching the little white balls of light struggling, striving to shine against the oncoming wave of oppressing darkness. I hear the dull thud of two objects hitting the ground. I look down to see a six and a three boring into the back of my skull. Nine. *Damno*. He tosses again. Two ones. Total, eleven. Two points ahead of me. There’s still two rounds to complete.

“First round goes to Marcus Corvus,” I declare. Marcus smiles and hands the dice to me.

“Your turn. Maybe Fortuna will be with you this time, no?

“Maybe.” I shake the dice and throw. Six, six. “Maybe.” I throw again. Six, six. *Vultures.* Good. Very good.

“Not bad,” says Marcus. “Let’s see if I can top that.” He grabs the dice and throws. Six, six. Marcus grins and throws again. Six, one. Total, 19. I win. One more round.

There is a strange fierceness in Marcus’ eyes. A slight glint I did not see before. It was the look one gets when in the heat of battle, when a predator captures his prey. The look that sends shivers up your spine.

Ignoring this I take the dice, blow on them for good luck, and throw. One, four. One more throw. Breathe. And with shaky hands I throw the dice and mutter under my breath, “*As iacta alea est.*” The die has been cast. They spin. Tilting, teetering. Finally they fall. Six, four. Almost a *Venus*, a perfect score. Almost. But combining for a total of 14.

The fire dancing in the pit casts dark shadows on Marcus’ face, twisting his features, disorienting the mind. He reaches for the dice. Once in his grasp he blows on them and tosses. Six, one.

Please don’t get three, four.

He tosses again. The dice hit the ground, bouncing back to land down again on three and four. *Venus*. Game goes to Marcus. Lost. Lost by a mere three. I stare at the die cast upon the ground. The *Parcae*, the Fates were laughing, mocking me. As if I haven’t already lost enough in this world.

“I do believe I have won,” speaks Marcus, breaking my trance of despair. “You owe me a secret.” He leans in, elbows on his knees, palms under his chin, waiting. “We haven’t got all night. The dark is almost done stretching across the sky, trying to catch up with the sun. Before long, the light will have moved on.”

I say nothing,

“Come on. We had a deal. You know you can’t go back on your word.”

I know. I know better than any one. Going back on your word results in death – pointless, useless, violent death. Though I don’t see how my response would not degrade us into that either. I sigh. “Give me a moment.”

“You’ve had several,” he retorts.

I study Marcus with wary eyes. “Alright. You have to swear to Jupiter you’ll not utter a word of this conversation.”

“I swear to Jupiter, I will not utter any word of this conversation.”

The point of no return. Slowly, softly I start my story. “At age eleven, my parents were murdered.” I pause. “Up until then I lived a normal life. My parents were like any normal citizen. Loyal. Obedient. Or so I thought. What I didn’t know was that they plotted against the Roman Republic,” another pause. “They wanted the senate destroyed. It was pure luck I hadn’t been killed that night either. I was outside like I shouldn’t have been, practicing my sword fighting,” I stare at Marcus. “When I got home I found both my parents dead – stabbed to death in the back. Let’s just say I spent a couple years seeking to return the favor. But to no avail. I went to go live with my aunt. For a couple years she cared for me. Then once more the one I loved was snatched away by death. And now I’m here.” I finish with a sarcastic, flourishing, half-bow.

Marcus Corvus takes this all in. “Do you still seek revenge?”

One heartbeat, two heartbeats, three heartbeats. “No,” I say.

We both know it’s a lie.

He doesn’t comment. Marcus stands casually and brushes off his trousers. After a moment of staring at the sky he looks down at me. “Well thank you for an intriguing game. I hope to someday hear the rest of your story.” With those words he turns away and marches back to wherever he came from, leaving me alone with nothing but my thoughts for company once more.

With a heavy thump I lay on the ground, wishing once more that I could reverse time. *Non omnia possumus omnes.* We all cannot do everything. If that were so then life would be so much simpler. So much easier. I listen to the gruff laughter of the soldiers and faint scratches of makeshift chess and checker boards and pieces clinks as they connect with the each other. I breathe in the musky scent of the camp. Maybe one day… Maybe… Gradually my eyes close, my mind drifts into the sweet sanctuary of darkness. And I don’t have to think anymore.

I jerk awake in a frenzy – Where, what, how? I look down at myself and realize I am no longer an eleven-year-old boy covered in blood. I glance at my hands to find them devoid of swords. I’m not in my house. My parents’ lifelessly glazed eyes aren’t hauntingly fixated in the distance. There are no corpses piled in high towers, faces showing the men I’ve killed. The innocents I’ve murdered. I’m in a roman camp. My personal own form of Hell.

I look up. The sun has almost reached the horizon. I pause to calculate the time I was asleep. Not long. Fifteen minutes at most. It is shocking what fifteen minutes of sleep can do to a human. It can drag up the past in tidal waves of hatred and hopelessness. Sleep was the one place I thought would be safe.

So much for that.

Slowly I push myself off up the ground and stand shakily. Food. I need food. Knowing there were no more rations in my bag, I follow the trail of scuffed footprints to the nearest place in camp that had cooked food. The closer I got, the more noise filled my ears became. Oh how soldiers love to talk. It was one thing that kept them distracted from their miserable lives.

“Did you hear about the girl in – “

“There’s no good alcohol in this lousy, no good, rotten – “

“And I said to him, ‘I don’t give a damn about your – “

Story after story pile and meld together, creating a conglomeration of highly embellished tales and halfhearted rumors. Despite their history of distortion of evidence, I always try to listen to a couple here and there. These rumors are the only source of what’s going on in the outside world. From time to time there are a couple useful pieces of information.

At long last my eye catches sight of venison and fresh grapes. My stomach growls in response to the sight of food. So close yet still so far way. Step after step I make my way towards the delectable vision. About halfway there, I notice two men huddled together whispering. I change alter my route so as to shuffle pass them on the way to the food. As I become closer I can make out what they are saying.

“ – Wanted Caesar to yield.”

“No!”

“Yes! Apparently they think he is becoming too powerful.”

“But he isn’t going to?

“From what I heard he refused.”

“Therefore?”

“Well he is already on bad terms with them. I believe it’s going to be civil war.”

Upon hearing this I halt in my tracks, kicking up dirt. Civil War? That means Caesar is defying the Senate… Which also means we would have to cross the Rubicon. After several stunned seconds, faintly I realize the men are still talking.

“How long do we have?”

“He’s secretly gathering a couple cohorts now to cross.”

“If they fail…”

“I know.”

I don’t wait to hear any more. My legs take off in a flurry of their own device. I rush over to where I had temporarily laid my things on the ground. I roll up my mat and shove it into my bag then search around for any random objects that could have fallen out. Near the fire I spot my dice. I reach down to pick them up then stop mid reach, laughing. A six and a three were face up. *Venus.* Better late than never. I picked them up and went to find the cohorts marching for Rome.

Works Citied

Alec. "Roman Military Food." *Ludus Militis*. N.p., 2013. Web. 27 Mar. 2015.

     <http://www.ludusmilitis.org/index.php?topic=86.0>.

"Civil War." *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*. Ed. Infoplease. 6th ed.

     Columbia University Press., Oct. 2013. Web. 28 Mar. 2015.

     <http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/people/

     caesar-julius-civil-war.html>.

Fife, Steven. "Athletics, Leisure, and Entertainment in Ancient Rome."

*Ancient History Encyclopedia*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. *Ancient.eu*. Web. 17 Feb.

"Julius Caesar Crosses the Rubicon, 49 BC." *Eye Witness to History*. Ibis

     Communications, Inc, 2002. Web. 27 Mar. 2015.

     <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/caesar.htm>.

"Latin language." *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia™*. New York: Columbia

     University Press, 2014. *General OneFile*. Web. 31 Mar. 2015.

     <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/

     i.do?id=GALE%7CA69214502&v=2.1&u=lake72770&it=r&p=GPS&sw=w&am

     p;asid=3f4544dbe7aef2d8edda35412333e4f9>.

"Wars and Warfare, Roman." *Ancient Greece and Rome*: *An Encyclopedia for*

*Students*. Ed. Carroll Moulton. Vol. 4. New York: Charles Scribner's

     Sons, 1998. 126-129. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 8 Feb. 2015.

     <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/

     i.doid=GALE%7CCX2897200495&v=2.1&u=lake72770&it=r&p=GPS&sw=w&

     amp;asid=63fdcd4ac88946bdff6ef738fa045df4>.

Attribution of Resource

1. Alec. "Roman Military Food." *Ludus Militis*. N.p., 2013. Web. 27 Mar. 2015.

      <http://www.ludusmilitis.org/index.php?topic=86.0>.

* Venison and grapes were food eaten by Roman soldiers

2. "Civil War." *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*. Ed. Infoplease. 6th ed.

      Columbia University Press., Oct. 2013. Web. 28 Mar. 2015.

      <http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/people/

      caesar-julius-civil-war.html>.

* Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon January 19, 49 B.C. However the are no records of the weather conditions during the time of crossing
* Julius Caesar cried "Iacta alea est" before crossing the Rubicon
* The senate feared the power and popularity Julius Caesar was gaining
* The Senate wished for him to give up his army
* Caser responded by saying he would give up his army if Pompey gave up his
* Senate then said if Caesar didn’t comply, he would be made an enemy of the people
* Caesar ignored Senate and marched his army into Rome

3. Fife, Steven. "Athletics, Leisure, and Entertainment in Ancient Rome."

*Ancient History Encyclopedia*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. *Ancient.eu*. Web. 17 Feb.

* Ancient Romans played a wide variety of board games
* [Dice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dice) (*Tesserae*)
* Knucklebones (*Tali* or *Tropa*)
* Roman Chess (*Latrunculi*)
* Roman Checkers (*Calculi*)
* Tic-tac-toe (*Terni Lapilli*)
* Roman backgammon (*Tabula*)

4. "Julius Caesar Crosses the Rubicon, 49 BC." *Eye Witness to History*. Ibis

      Communications, Inc, 2002. Web. 27 Mar. 2015.

      <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/caesar.htm>.

* Caesar left after sunset to cross the Rubicon

5. "Latin language." *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia™*. New York: Columbia

      University Press, 2014. *General OneFile*. Web. 31 Mar. 2015.

      <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/

      i.do?id=GALE%7CA69214502&v=2.1&u=lake72770&it=r&p=GPS&sw=w&am

      p;asid=3f4544dbe7aef2d8edda35412333e4f9>.

* Latin was the language spoken in Rome
* There were different types of dialects of Latin
* Soldiers spoke the form known as Vulgar Latin
* *Res secundae –* good luck/ good fortune
* *Gratias* – Thanks
* *Futuo* – Fuck
* *Damno* – Damn
* *Iacta alea est* - The die is cast
* *Parcae* - The Fates
* *Non omnia possumus omnes* - We all cannot do everything

6. "Wars and Warfare, Roman." *Ancient Greece and Rome*: *An Encyclopedia for*

*Students*. Ed. Carroll Moulton. Vol. 4. New York: Charles Scribner's

      Sons, 1998. 126-129. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 8 Feb. 2015.

      <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/

      i.doid=GALE%7CCX2897200495&v=2.1&u=lake72770&it=r&p=GPS&sw=w&

      amp;asid=63fdcd4ac88946bdff6ef738fa045df4>.

* Military was rigorous
* Soldier often had to march great distances
* Had to be ready to fight at any moment